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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses how secondary students with learning disabilities or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder can investigate postsecondary programs and find the right college to meet their needs. It begins by exploring when students should begin their college planning and the role of transition plans in determining student goals and vision for life as an adult. Students should understand their own learning needs to identify the accommodations they will require in postsecondary programs. The legal rights of students with disabilities after high school are outlined, as well as areas students should evaluate in determining the desirability of a college. The final section presents strategies for becoming informed about college programs, including: (1) participate in orientation programs to become familiar with campus life and ask questions about classes, faculty, resources, and services; (2) don't procrastinate about gathering information about courses and professors; (3) talk to other students about classes and professors; (4) audit classes to determine whether the class is right; (5) check the Internet for information about colleges and universities; and (6) meet the professor to ask questions about the course. (CR)

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By

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Selecting A College for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Juliana M. Taymans and Lynda L.West

Students with learning disabilities (LD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) approach the transition from high school to college with an array of learning strengths and needs. They need to understand their own abilities and guide their own transition planning by looking at various postsecondary options. If college is the path chosen, investigating postsecondary programs to find the right match is a crucial step. In general, postsecondary support services are less intensive than secondary special education services. Students need to become experts on how to engineer their academic success, a process that requires experiences that build self-insight, self-advocacy, and resourcefulness.

When to Begin College Planning

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team consider post-school goals when the student is about to enter high school at about age 14. Beginning at age 16 (or younger, if appropriate) a statement of transition services needed by the student must be included in the IEP. High school experiences, both academic and social, greatly influence future options for all students. For adolescents with disabilities, these experiences are pivotal.

Transition plans should be grounded in the student's goals and vision for life as an adult, career interests, extracurricular and community activities, and the skills the student needs to progress toward his or her goals. Planning should include preparation for proficiency tests and other assessments needed for postsecondary academic work (e.g., SATs), as well as the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

During the last 2 years of high school, diagnostic testing should be conducted to further define the LD or ADHD. Colleges require documentation of a disability (i.e., results of tests indicating the presence of a disability) in order to provide support services; having an IEP or Section 504 plan in high school is not enough documentation to obtain services from colleges. Students entering postsecondary programs will need to present current assessment data in order to receive accommodations at college.

Even for students who have struggled academically in high school, postsecondary education may very well be a possibility. Students who wonder whether college is a realistic option can explore summer pre-college courses for high school students who have completed their junior or senior year. Alternatively, students can take a college course the summer before they enroll to get to know the campus, learn how to use the library, and sharpen their study strategies and time management skills.

Understanding Strengths, Learning Needs and the Support Needed

Students must understand their strengths and learning needs not only to be successful in coursework, but also to identify the accommodations they will require. For example, will they need academic support services such as math labs, writing workshops, reading courses, computer labs, tutoring, or counseling? Will they want to take courses to improve social skills, study skills, learning strategies, communications skills, or assertiveness?

Understanding and using technology can be another key to success. Computers and related technologies are expanding opportunities and increasing instructional access for numerous individuals with LD and ADHD. Students should consider both instructional technology (e.g., computers, tape recorders, or videos used as a means of instruction) and assistive technology (technology used by individuals to compensate for specific disabilities).

Assistive technology is most effective if it accentuates an individual's strengths and minimizes areas of need. Selecting appropriate technology for an individual should take into account the individual's learning profile, the tasks and functions to be performed, the specific technology, and the contexts of use (Raskin, 1998). For example, word processors with text-to-speech, outlining, word prediction, and speech recognition capabilities offer assistive capabilities depending on a person's specific disabilities. Technology is like any other tool: The challenge is to find the technology applications that work best for the individual and learn how to use them. This takes an investment of time and money, but the payoff can be increased productivity and creativity (Malouf, 2000).

Understanding Legal Rights

Once students with disabilities graduate from high school, they are no longer eligible for services provided by the school system and will not have an IEP. If they have been receiving rehabilitation services as part of their transition plans, they can continue to receive them. They will have an Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP) and may be eligible for services such as postsecondary education, counseling, and vocational evaluation and assessment.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) bars discrimination against students with disabilities in the college application process. Once admitted, students may request reasonable accommodations to allow them to participate in courses, exams, and other activities. Most colleges and universities have a disability support services office to assist in providing accommodations.

Identifying the Desirable Characteristics of a College

Once the student's strengths, learning needs, and level of support needed have been delineated, it is time to look at the characteristics of colleges that might be a good match for the student. Consider various types of colleges: two-year colleges, public community colleges, private junior colleges, four-year colleges and universities, as well as graduate and professional schools. Students with LD and/or ADHD can succeed in all types of schools, including the most prestigious.

Students must determine the characteristics of colleges that will make them happy and support their success. For example, how big is their high school? Will they feel more comfortable in a larger or a smaller college? Will they be happier in an urban or a rural area? Can they meet the academic requirements? Should they find a college that doesn't impose rigid prerequisites? Should they consider enrolling part-time rather than taking a full course load? What are their academic and extra-curricular interests?

In looking at colleges, students may also want to consider whether progressive attitudes toward instruction prevail. Colleges that are using instructional techniques and electronic technology in a flexible way can increase students' success. For example, if courses are web-based so lecture notes or videos of presentations are available online and can be viewed multiple times, then students have natural supports built into a course.

Finding and Comparing Colleges

Like all students preparing to choose a college, students with LD or ADHD must identify colleges that appear to have the desired qualities and select a few candidate colleges for further investigation. They need to visit colleges, see the right people on campus, and be prepared to ask the right questions.

Students with disabilities must also look at other factors. They should investigate the support services offered by candidate colleges, discuss them with college staff (e.g., personnel in the Office of Disability Support Services), and verify that the services advertised by the college will actually be available to the student. For example, is tutoring available? Will extended time be allowed for taking tests? Is someone available to help with taking notes or preparing written work? Will college policies allow extended time to complete a course of study so that fewer classes may be taken over a longer period of time?

Furthermore, students with LD or ADHD must decide whether and to whom to disclose the presence of the disability. To obtain support services, students must self-disclose their disabilities to the Office of Disability Support Services. That office will notify professors of the necessary accommodations. Students are not required to give faculty information about a disability, but to obtain the best course work accommodations, they must be able to explain their needs to instructors. Therefore, students will want to investigate specific classes before they register for them. Some strategies for becoming informed about classes are listed below:

- Participate in orientation programs. These programs provide opportunities to become familiar with campus life and to ask questions of continuing students and advisors about classes, faculty, resources, and services.
- Don't procrastinate. Do not wait until the last minute to begin gathering information about courses and professors. Most Offices for Disability Support Services will allow students with disabilities to register a few days before other students.
- Talk to other students. Other students are an excellent source of information about classes and professors.
- Audit classes. It is possible to observe a class for a limited period of time to determine whether this is the right class. Students who audit a course are not responsible for exams or assignments.
- Check the Internet. Most colleges and universities offer an increasing amount of information, including the course syllabus (outline of the course), objectives, textbook, readings, and assignments.
- Meet the professor. Professors have scheduled office hours to answer questions about the course. Getting the textbooks and reading list ahead of time also allows students an opportunity to get a head start on the course.

For many individuals with LD and ADHD, the transition to adulthood will be a time of positive self-discovery, but it will take trial and error. Goals and successes can sometimes be elusive, and the hidden nature of LD and ADHD can pose special challenges. Careful preparation for the transition to college can help.

RESOURCES

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RELATED WEB SITES

ldonline—http://www.ldonline.org

Association for Higher Education and Disability—http://www.ahead.org

Peterson's Education Center—http://www.petersons.com

HEATH—http:www.heath.gwu.edu

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